

# It's the Noise

Ted Whitaker aged 14

## Author's Introduction:

*In WW1 and WW2, the Royal Navy attempted to counter the submarine threat of German U-Boats by disguising naval vessels as merchant ships in order to ambush them. They were known as Q-Ships.*

*This story is partially inspired by a Q-Ship called the HMS Willamette Valley, cover name RFA Edgehill which sank on the 29<sup>th</sup> of June 1940 after a confrontation with U-Boat U51, resulting in heavy casualties.*

*The survivors would have been rescued by seaplane or nearby ships once the U-Boat threat was diminished. However, rescue, in many cases, was not immediate, with survivors having to brave the violent oceans for hours, or even days. This was the aspect I wanted to focus on.*

*During the aftermath of the fictional battle the protagonist of my story is stripped of everything other than the immediacy of his situation as he tries to cope with the hostile environment of the sea and the inhumanity of war. This story is written in the first person and many details are left ambiguous as the narrator is essentially drifting in and out of consciousness.*

*The ending is left to the reader's imagination.*

It's the noise. The sound of the waves. Overwhelming. Short gasps of sound as I fight to stay afloat. It's a battle I'm losing. Black ocean, orange fire, and a sheen of oil. I'm drowning. Choking. Every feeble cry replaced by a mouthful of saltwater and oil. I need to stay above water, but I have no choice in this. I belong to the sea now.

It's cold, so cold. Blood is freezing inside my veins. My limbs grow heavier and heavier.

The British guns are still firing as their warship slowly sinks. A wave cuts me down. Something has me, it's pulling me under. I kick my legs but it's no use.

This is it.

This is the end.

This is the day I die.

Under the water. Consumed. My heart is all I can hear, pounding in my ears. Fear. I don't want to die. Death becoming reality. No air, a panicked breath. I feel the water entering my lungs. Bubbles in my vision. Bubbles which are now changing direction.

I'm being pulled out of the icy water, my clothes weighing me down. Black oil clinging to my skin. I'm heaved onto the deck of a wooden life raft. Taking a quick, painful breath. Coughing, raising my head, I purge myself of seawater. Then I see them. Men fighting for their lives. Patches of sea on fire. The men try to escape the flames as a wave takes them in. The screams. I can do nothing to help them. Exhaustion takes over...

My eyes open. It's still night. The fires seem smaller. The screaming has stopped. I could have been one of those men.

As the nausea leaves me, I feel a sharp pain on the side of my head. It feels as if someone has shot me. I feel pain. That means I'm alive!

But so is the Tommy in front of me.

His clothes and his skin are stained with a tar-like layer of oil. If it weren't for his unintelligible shouting, he wouldn't have given himself away. My uniform, my insignia, yes, he knows I'm the enemy. The expression on his face clearly indicates that he regrets who he saved.

The waves are shaking the raft violently, letting me know that moving too much or too fast could tip the whole thing over, then we'll both drown. He knows this as well; this must be the only reason the Tommy hasn't torn my throat out already. So, we just sit here for minutes, or is it hours, as hell unfolds around us.

I can see the British ship; it's being dragged into the depths of the ocean. A huge steel coffin, taking all life with it. Dim lights achieving nonexistence as its electricity cuts out. A dull groan emanating around us, as the air is forced out of the ship as the bulkheads collapse. Twisted metal fracturing. The warship vanishes. All that remains is a wave that comes towards us but dies in the process. I haven't seen a ship sink before; we'd always been gone by then, under the waves and out of sight as they taught us to.

Now, the only light is distant burning oil. Large pools of fire sitting on top of the sea where the warship had been. Flames dancing as if on a mirrored ballroom floor. It's hard to see where the sea ends and the night sky begins. Flying among the debris with the moon and the stars. But we're not flying, we're on a small wooden raft, in the middle of the Atlantic.

Soon I can't even see my shaking hands, the floating fires becoming too distant to give me any sight. The only light comes from the eyes of the Tommy, reflecting the flames like the devil himself looking at me.

He stares at me. Is he planning something? He's clutching his side. Is there a weapon concealed there? Is he waiting for the perfect moment to kill me?

The sea isn't still. Waves catch us, swaying the raft back and forth. I dig my nails into the planks, watching as the horizon disappears and reappears in front of us. The waves lapping at the sides, as if tasting to see whether it should eat us whole. The sea is furious, each wave feels like an argument against our existence. Scents of oil with every gust of wind. Just the furious monster beneath us.

The only light now is from the moon. The Tommy continues to watch me. He is unflinching. The waves are calming down. He mumbles something incoherent, nothing more than a whisper, and then continues his silence.

My head throbs. I must have hit it when I fell from the gunner's seat. Tentatively I lift my hand up to my right temple. Instant pain. I can just make out the crimson colour. Blood. I need to clean the wound.

In a moment of desperation, I dive my hands deep into the chilling waters. Cupping them, I pour the oily seawater onto my open head wound.

Agony. A sharp, hideous pain, like my own skull exploding. Was this the right thing to do? What was I thinking? The Tommy shouts in panic, I think he's telling me to stop.

Overwhelmed by the pain, I feel myself drifting in and out of consciousness. Death would be welcome right now, to join my comrades. Darkness takes over my vision. Then nothing.

*For just one moment I'm sure I can taste coffee on my lips. Inhaling its welcome warmth. Except it's salty and it's filling my lungs!*

Choking, I cough up saltwater. My throat is raw. The ocean surrounds me. It's morning. The Tommy is awake. I see his whole face for the first time. Dark hair, he's about my age. His skin is pale, too pale. His eyes red as if they've been open for years. He's still holding his side. Noticing my gaze, he whispers something in English and chuckles dryly, the threat is still there.

The cold is eating away at my skin. Frost has collected on the deck, I run my hands over it, watching in childish wonder as it breaks away. Looking around me, I spot piles of debris, bits of wood and wreckage in the water. There's a body of a sailor still wearing his coat. It's keeping the dead man warm. Here I am, jealous of a corpse.

The sea is both blue, black, and grey. Blending into each other, not meaning anything anymore. I can't tell whether these remains are from my U-Boat or from the warship. In the end it doesn't really matter. Both crews now sharing the same unmarked grave.

"We're going to get out of this," I mutter, half to the Tommy, half to myself. He nods, as if he understands. It could be the seawater, or it could be the blood dripping down my neck, but I feel that if I could succumb to sleep again all would be well.

I cast my mind back to the U-Boat, I was manning the deck gun, aiming at what we thought was a merchant vessel, before its shutters fell down revealing a fully armed British warship. Both vessels firing instantaneously. It's the noise that gets you. The warship quickly found its target, hitting our exposed U-Boat. I was flung off. Saved from the fate of my crew, my comrades. It seemed to take an age for me to hit the water. I hear the Commander ordering the torpedoes to be fired. Both of our vessels sinking together.

It's the noise. A faint buzzing overhead. I look up. The sun is burning, and this sun is reflecting against a moving metal surface. It's a seaplane! A British seaplane. I don't care, it's a chance of rescue. I try to shout as loud as I can, my voice hoarse, waving my arms, daring to jump upwards. Its wings dip, first the left one, then the right. It's seen us!

"You won't take us today!" I yell at the ocean. Laughing I turn to the Tommy, "I'm your prisoner now." Beneath me the raft shifts and the Tommy slips backwards overboard.

Panic. I lunge over, falling to my knees. My hands flail to catch him, still slippery with oil. Panic. Instinctively I dive in, and in one motion I push him back onto the raft. Breath taken away, I splutter, the freezing water stinging my skin. Back on the raft, looking at him now, barely blinking, breathing shallow. His hand has moved from his side, revealing a metal splinter deep into his abdomen. He was never holding a weapon; he was holding a wound.

He's dying, eyes closing. No, not now, not when we're so close to rescue.

I gently tap his face, trying to keep him awake. The plane is going to land. "There, see, it's your comrades, here to rescue us..."

Us? Will they rescue me? Will they show me mercy like he did? Will they save me?

Taking a deep breath, I prepare myself for an uncertain fate. I can already see he's slipping away...

"Hey Tommy, they are here to rescue you! Can you hear the noise?"